

GORBACHEV BARS INDEPENDENCE BIDS OF 2 BALDIC LANDS

NO SANCTIONS DECLARED

Latvian and Estonian Moves Called Illegal, but Room Is Left for Discussion

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RIGA, Latvia, May 14 — President Mikhail S. Gorbachev today officially rejected moves toward independence taken by Latvia and Estonia, saying the two Baltic republics lacked any legal basis for their attempts to leave the Soviet Union.

But Mr. Gorbachev's terse decrees, read on the main national evening television news, did not include an ultimatum or threaten economic sanctions similar to those in place against Lithuania, which two months ago made the first and most radical break with Moscow of the three Baltic republics.

By withholding punishment against Estonia and Latvia, which have both taken a more gradual approach to secession, Mr. Gorbachev seemed to leave the door open for dialogue. A parliamentary delegation from Latvia is scheduled to go to Moscow on Tuesday for what one member of Parliament described as preliminary talks.

Rising Ethnic Tension

Mr. Gorbachev's official reaction came amid rising tension in the debate over independence between ethnic Latvians and non-Latvians, mainly Russians, who make up close to half the republic's population.

Scuffles broke out today in front of the Latvian Parliament when groups of Soviet Army officers and soldiers gathered to protest against laws they find threatening and insulting.

Janis Bojars, a member of both the Latvian and Soviet Parliaments, said the members of the military were concerned that they would have nowhere to go if they were forced out of Latvia. He said they were also troubled by suggestions that the Latvian Parliament might start formally referring to them as an "occupying force."

Meeting With Protesters

The melee, in which soldiers reportedly hit a woman and roughed up a radio reporter, took place after a delegation of the protesters met with the Latvian President, Anatolijs Gorbunovs.

The open conflict heightened concern about possible violence on Tuesday, when a strike protesting independence is supposed to take place.

A helicopter flew over the city today dropping leaflets urging Soviet citizens to leave work and take to the streets "in defense of Soviet power in Latvia."

"Contempt and shame will cover the descendants of those who in this decisive moment do not speak out against the counterrevolution," the leaflet read. "Men, look into the eyes of your children, your mothers and your wives. Can you leave them defenseless?"

The leaflet, signed by Interfront, a group composed mostly of Russians

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opposed to independence, was quickly condemned today on the floor of the Latvian Parliament, with some members calling on the republic's prosecutor to bring charges against the authors for inciting violence.

Priest Calls for Conciliation

On Latvian television tonight, the Rev. Aleksei Zotov, a Russian Orthodox priest and a member of Parliament, warned people to reject calls for political confrontation.

"Men, who can know whether this will lead to blood on the streets of Riga?" he said.

A group called the Consolidated Council of Labor Collectives has called for the strike on Tuesday to protest the moves toward independence. But two local journalists said the strike was not expected to spread beyond Riga's shipyards and clothing manufacturers and other factories where most managers are of Russian origin.

Today a delegation of members of Parliament representing rural areas urged workers to stay at their jobs and devote their efforts to raising the standard of living.

Even without direct sanctions organized by Moscow, economic pressures on Latvia have increased since the independence movement began to pick up strength. The Soviets' partial blockade of Lithuania, imposed after the government in Vilnius declared independence on March 11, has caused a sharp drop in gasoline supplies here, because much of Latvia's gasoline arrives by way of a Lithuanian refinery.

Few cars were on the streets today, and a private taxi driver complained of having to buy gasoline on the black market at six times the usual rate.

Panic Buying in Markets

In the meantime, an outburst of panic buying — prompted by fears of a blockade — has emptied the shelves of goods. People in Riga said that it was almost impossible to find sugar, matches, macaroni and many other staples in government stores and that food in the private markets was also in low supply, despite high prices.

Mr. Gorbachev's reaction had been anticipated here in the capital of Latvia, where a newly elected Parliament began the secession process 10 days ago.

After Lithuania declared a clean break with Moscow on March 11, Estonia announced on March 30 that it would make a step-by-step withdrawal from Soviet law. On May 4, Latvia made its declaration, crafted to minimize confrontation with Moscow. It established an open-ended transition period to independence, during which most Soviet laws would apply.

"We had expected this," Vintra Kusinja, a member of the Popular Front, a movement whose leaders have been at the head of the drive for independence, said of Mr. Gorbachev's reaction. "It is normal, and it changes nothing. It is simply a statement from a foreign state concerning our affairs."

In his decree on Latvia, Mr. Gorbachev said the republic's declaration restoring its 1922 Constitution and declaring invalid its forced annexation into the Soviet Union in 1940 was in violation of the Soviet Constitution.

Moscow's New Secession Law

Moscow has said the republics must follow a newly adopted secession law, which requires approval by residents in a referendum, a waiting period of up to five years and final approval by the full Soviet Congress. Representatives of the three Baltic republics have said they should not be bound by the secession law, because they were illegally annexed.

Ethnic Latvians say they have tried to reassure their non-Latvian neighbors that independence will not cost them their rights, but many Russians have objected to the haste with which the independence declaration was adopted and to what they say is its lack of consideration for minorities.

The conflict, which has divided the Parliament into two blocs, has heightened the bitter feelings of many Latvians at the privileges enjoyed by the Soviet military, whose members make up a large contingent of the non-Latvian population.